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GENERAL EDITORS: PETER HOLLAND AND STANLEY WELLS

*Shakespeare, Race,  
and Colonialism*

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but he has never talked about *exchanging* the two children, only that the white child shall be

substituted in the place of mine,  
To calm this tempest whirling in the court;  
And let the Emperor dandle him for his own.

(4.2.158-60)

We do not know whether this ever happens but certainly there is no 'tempest' in the court, no scandal about the empress having given birth to a black child and no report of a stillborn or dead child. Therefore it is as reasonable to assume that such a substitution has taken place as it is to surmise that Aaron is lying.

The news of the black child reaches the Goths and Lucius through Aaron himself, who is overheard by one of them talking to his child, and the Romans learn of its existence from Lucius, but only after Saturninus is dead. Lucius has promised Aaron the child will live, and at the end of the play he does not retract this promise, although we do not know what will become of it. Both Tamora and Aaron will die, but the scandal of their illicit liaison will survive through the child. This is the only interracial child in Shakespeare's plays, and it is so disturbing an idea that the play cannot discuss his fate or place in a cleaned up Rome. Critics have long commented that Aaron's defence of his child humanizes him. Titus is willing to kill his own children in order to honour his principles; Tamora can think of having this child murdered in order to protect her honour: only Aaron puts his child's life above his own. As Eldred Jones comments, Aaron's 'defence of his child is also his defence of his colour'. The child prompts him to question whether black is 'so base a hue' and to defend the steadfast nature of blackness, its inability to be washed white. In fact it is whiteness that is weaker and betrayed by blushes, or overcome by blackness, just as Tamora's colour is overwhelmed by Aaron's in their baby. Thus Aaron's pride in his child is pride in his colour as well as in his paternity; for him, as much as for the white Romans, race is indeed lineage.

## *Othello and the Racial Question*

*Othello* is both a fantasy of interracial love and social tolerance, and a nightmare of racial hatred and male violence. In this play, a white woman flouts the established social hierarchies of 'clime, complexion and degree' to marry a black man, an act that betrays, in the eyes of some beholders, 'Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural!' (3.3.235-8). Location, skin colour, and class are seen to add up to 'nature' itself. But the real tragedy of the play lies in the fact that these hierarchies are not external to the pair. Iago's machinations are effective because Othello is predisposed to believing his pronouncements about the inherent duplicity of women, and the necessary fragility of an 'unnatural' relationship between a young, white, well-born woman and an older black soldier. Ideologies, the play tells us, only work because they are not entirely external to us. Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones.

The portrayal of Othello, the 'Moor of Venice' stands at the complicated crux of contemporary beliefs about black people and Muslims. As we have seen, black-skinned people were usually typed as godless, bestial, and hideous, fit only to be saved (and in early modern Europe, enslaved) by Christians. On the other hand, commentators such as Henry Blount wondered whether Muslims, with their tightly organized religion and sophisticated empires, were 'absolutely barbarous' or whether they had 'another kind of civility, different from ours'.<sup>1</sup> Both blacks and Muslims were regarded as given to unnatural sexual and domestic practices, as highly emotional and even irrational, and prone to anger and jealousy; above all, both existed outside the Christian fold. *Othello* yokes together and reshapes available images

of 'blackamoors' and Moors, giving us a black Moor who has both a slave past and a noble lineage, a black skin and thick lips as well as great military skill and rhetorical abilities, a capacity for tenderness as well as a propensity to violence.

This cocktail has provoked fierce debates about Othello's appearance and racial origins. Various characters in the play (including himself) harp upon his 'sooty bosom' and his 'thick lips'; recalling age-old stereotypes of black people, they call him 'a devil', 'old black ram', and 'a Barbary horse', all images which attached to sub-Saharan Africans. But the 'lascivious Moor' with his 'sword of Spain' also evokes the image of the 'turbaned Turk' to whom he compares himself at the end of the play. Did Shakespeare picture Othello like the slightly menacing turbaned and aristocratic figure shown in a contemporary picture (Fig. 6)? In an earlier period, critics who wanted to rescue Shakespeare's hero from the taint of blackness were eager to prove that even if dark or 'African', in Shakespeare's imagination, Othello could not possibly be 'Negroid'. Today, his blackness often gets underplayed by those who want to draw our attention to the Muslim aspects of the 'Moor' or emphasized at their expense. Thus there is a real difficulty in deciding whether Othello's tragedy has to do with his being a 'circumcised dog' or his having a 'sooty bosom'.

I suggest that it is impossible, but also unnecessary, to decide whether Othello is *more* or *less* 'African'/'black' than 'Turkish'/Muslim. Turks and Muslims were often regarded as both morally and physically darker than Christians, and some dark-skinned Africans were also Muslims. A picture of a noble Moor in Cesare Vecellio's sixteenth-century book of costumes shows a man with turban, flowing robes, and a sword, with thick lips and a dark skin (Fig. 7). This picture tells us that despite the physical difference between most Spanish Moors and most sub-Saharan Africans, a more composite figure was imaginable. Since there were also fair Muslims and black non-Muslims, however, we should not simply explain away the tension between these different aspects of Othello. Instead of simply corresponding to any particular historically identifiable group of black Muslims, Othello indicates the way in which medieval as well as newer ideas about blacks and Muslims intersected in early modern England. He is, as Dympna Callaghan points out, the representation of an idea of the Moor, and such an idea does not simply



7. Moor of Quality from Cesare Vecellio, *Degli abiti antichi et moderne...*

reflect historical reality but mediates it.<sup>2</sup> More than any other play of the time, *Othello* allows us to see that skin colour, religion, and location were often contradictorily yoked together within ideologies of 'race', and that all of these attributes were animated by notions of sexual and gender difference.

### The Jealous Moor

Early modern accounts of the East, and especially Turkey, were obsessed with its supposed sensuality, as well as by its imperial might. These two qualities were sometimes regarded as antithetical

to one another, and at other times as complementary. 'Jealousy' was a term that was applicable in both public and private spheres—Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* informed its readers that Turks were prone to 'jealous outrages' of the political kind, and cited many examples where Turks brutally eliminated their rivals.<sup>3</sup> The political and the familial spheres were closely intertwined in the Ottoman Empire. Richard Knolles, whose popular and enormously influential *General History of the Turks* (1603) was consulted by Shakespeare while writing *Othello*, described murders within the royal family, with rulers killing their brothers, cousins, and even sons to thwart any political opposition. These books also detailed instances of Turkish sexual jealousies and strict control over women's lives, implying that sexual and political power were somehow interrelated. Robert Burton cites various authorities to make his point:

Southern men are more hot, lascivious and jealous, than such as live in the North: they can hardly contain themselves in those hotter climes, but are the most subject to prodigious lusts. Leo Afer telleth incredible things almost of the lust and jealousy of his Countrymen of Africa, and especially such as live about Carthage, and so doth every Geographer of them in Asia, Turkey, Spain, Italy. Germany hath not so many drunkards, England Tobacconists, France Dancers, Holland Mariners, as Italy alone hath jealous husbands.... (827)

Hence, lust and jealousy as well as black skin are the result of a hot climate. We see too that lands in Southern Europe coalesce with those East or south of Europe to create a general category, 'Southern' which includes, among other locations, Africa, Turkey, Spain, and Italy, and is distinguished from a Northern Englishness.

*Othello* is partly set in Italy, a setting that in Shakespeare's plays both reflects, and offers a contrast to, the audience's England. Italians are 'Southern' like the Asians, different from the English, but when placed against the Moors, they are part of Christian Europe. Othello, 'the Moor of Venice' is a Moor who cannot fully become a part of Venice. His jealousy is rooted in this fact and in his difference from Desdemona, a difference that Iago plays upon in order to persuade Othello that his wife cannot really love him for very long. In Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, from which Shakespeare took the story

of the unhappy marriage of a Moor and a Venetian lady, Desdemona tells her husband, 'you Moors are so hot by nature that any little thing moves you to anger and revenge'. Shakespeare has his Desdemona counter this stereotype; when Emilia asks her, 'Is he not jealous?' she replies 'Who, he? I think the sun where he was born | Drew all such humours from him' (3.4.28-30). But the play goes on to show us that, despite his seeming different from other Moors, Othello ultimately embodies the stereotype of Moorish lust and violence—a jealous, murderous husband of a Christian lady.

Stories of a Turkish emperor or general loving and then killing a beautiful Christian woman circulated freely in early modern England. William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567) recounts that Hyerenee, a beautiful Greek, was murdered by Mahomet, 'the barbarous cruel Prince', because his passion for her distracted him from his duties as emperor. Mahomet kills Hyerenee before his assembled court, and asks his audience, 'Now ye know, whether or not your Emperor is able to repress and bridle his affection or not?'<sup>4</sup> Richard Knolles's *History of the Turks* (1603) narrates another version of this story, in which Irene becomes 'the mistress and commander' of the great conqueror Sultan Mahomet.<sup>5</sup> The Sultan's love changes him: 'his fierce nature was now by her tamed, and his wonted care of arms quite neglected: Mars slept in Venus lap' (350). Upon being rebuked by his adviser Mustapha Bassa, he is torn between his military duty and his love—'he was at war with himself'—a conflict that he resolves by killing Irene (352-3). Knolles also tells the story of yet another Greek lady called Manto, who was loved by the Turkish general Ionuses Bassa. The general, 'more amorous of her person than secured in her virtues, and after the manner of sensual men' soon 'began to have her in distrust, although he saw no great cause why'. His 'mad humour' grows to such an extent that when Manto attempts to escape, he kills her (557-9).

Shakespeare knew some of these texts and whether or not *Othello* was directly inspired by any of them, it certainly reworks their motif of a Muslim soldier who loves a Christian woman 'not wisely but too well'. Like Knolles's Irene, Desdemona has become 'our great captain's captain' (2.1.75), and Othello's jealousy, like Mahomet's, puts him 'at war with himself'; like Ionuses Bassa too, he torments himself and his loved one. Unlike these other figures, however, Othello is

not unmanned by his love for his 'fair warrior' (although Iago suggests precisely this to him). Rather, it is the erosion of his love that threatens to take away his 'occupation' and bring 'chaos' upon him. Shakespeare also goes to greater lengths than Knolles to map the sexual drama upon the racial and cultural one, making one hinge upon the other. The jealousy that tears Othello apart manifests itself as a division between his Christian, loving, rational self, and the Muslim identity that erupts and disrupts it.

Turkish harems were reputed to be filled with beautiful Christian girls captured to satisfy what John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* condemned as 'most filthy villainy of the bestial Turks'.<sup>6</sup> The Sultana Valide, wife of the Sultan Amurath III, was a Venetian woman of the house of Basso and was captured when young. Foxe, Knolles, and other writers also claimed that Turkish strongmen or Janizzaries were captured Christian men who were forcibly converted to Islam, and they described at length the misery, hunger, tortures, and indignities suffered by male as well as female captives. Thanks to the aggressive Turkish policy of converting Christians, says Foxe, 'there are few now remaining, which are Turks indeed by birth and blood'; the Turkish Empire is therefore upheld 'by the strength and power of soldiers which have been Christians, and now turned to Mahumet's religion, so that even their own natural language is now out of use among them' (964). Othello's story counters these tales. If Turkish warriors are really converted Christians, Othello the converted Moor will halt the menacing advance of the Turks, the latest in a long line of 'wicked Saracens' who, as Fox put it, 'in the space of thirty years, subdued Arabia, got Valencia, Phenicia, Syria, Egypt and Persia, and not long after they proceeded further and got Africa, and then Asia' (964).

But religious conversion speaks as much to a crisis of identity as to a triumph of self-fashioning. Foxe's statement that the Turks who threaten Europe are really converted Christians implies that race and culture can be acquired and shed. At the same time, Foxe also marks out Muslims as Satan's agents who are empowered by 'dissention and discord' among Christians, and suggests that the struggle between Christians and Turks is as eternal as that between good and evil. *Othello* responds to these anxieties about the nature of ethnic, racial, and religious identity. While Othello is the defender of the Christian state against the Muslim threat, he also embodies this threat. At the

end of the play, he describes his suicide as an act where his Christian half kills the Muslim half, much as long ago in Aleppo, he had killed 'a malignant and turbaned Turk', a 'circumcised dog' who had beaten 'a Venetian and traduced the state' (5.2.361-3). Despite being a Christian soldier, Othello cannot shed either his blackness or his 'Turkish' attributes, and it is his sexual and emotional self, expressed through his relationship with Desdemona, which interrupts and finally disrupts his newly acquired Christian and Venetian identity. In the eyes of many Venetians, he remains illegitimate as Desdemona's suitor; as her husband, he seems fated to play out the script of jealousy and wife-murder.

### The Infidelity of Women

In trying to understand the complex ways in which *Othello* plays upon racial and cultural difference, it is important to note that admiration as well as revulsion were both part of English reports about the tight political and sexual control of the Turks over their various subjects. One account of the Turkomanni people can barely hide its envy of the people whose wives 'spend their time in spinning, carding, knitting, or some household housewifery, not spending their time in gossiping or gadding abroad from place to place, and from house to house; from ale-house to tavern, as many wives in England do'. Describing the segregation of the sexes and the strict policing of women, it goes on:

If the like order were in England, women would be more dutiful and faithful to their husbands than they are for there if a man have a hundred women, if any one of them prostitute herself to any man but her own husband, he hath authority to bind her, hands and feet, and cast her unto a river, with a stone about her neck, and drown her. . . .<sup>7</sup>

We have seen that Othello's jealous violence reinforces stereotypes of 'Southern' men, but it is also crucial to note that Iago stokes and manipulates this violence by evoking equally commonplace images of women's duplicity. In fact, Iago does not believe Othello is the jealous type—'The Moor. . . | Is of a constant, loving, noble nature' he says (2.1.287-8). But this 'nature', he believes, can be transformed and returned to the stereotype of the jealous Turk by harping upon female

inconstancy. When they arrive at Cyprus, Iago tells Desdemona that women are

pictures out of door,  
Bells in your parlours; wildcats in your kitchens,  
Saints in your injuries; devils being offended,  
Players in your housewifery, and hussies in your beds.

(2.1.112-15)

This banter simply underlines what many men in the play believe about women. Brabantio has already cautioned Othello: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see. | She has deceived her father, and may thee' (1.3.292-3). Iago practically echoes these lines: 'She did deceive her father, marrying you, | And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks | She loved them most' (3.3.210-12). He warns Othello against 'the green-eyed monster' who consumes those men who expect fidelity from their wives, whereas 'That cuckold lives in bliss | Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger' (1.1.171-2). Those who know that all wives are potentially unfaithful arm themselves by not loving them too much.

Robert Burton also informed readers of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* that men who dote excessively on their wives are 'too effeminate' and likely to be jealous, and that this sentiment was especially 'evident in old men. . . . All wives are slippery, often unfaithful to their husbands. . . . but to old men most treacherous'. Finally, 'A fourth eminent cause of jealousy may be this, when he that is deformed, as Pindar says of Vulcan, without natural graces. . . . will marry some fair nice piece. . . . Can she be fair and honest too?' (832). Written after *Othello*, Burton's *Anatomy* could not have been an inspiration for the play but in fact may well have been influenced by it. Moreover, the overlap between the two texts indicates the nature of contemporary beliefs about both masculinity and jealousy, especially as Burton draws freely upon other texts and commentaries. It is striking that Iago harps upon all the causes of jealousy enumerated by Burton—Othello's excessive love for Desdemona, the enormous disparities of age, culture, and race between them, and women's propensity to stray. Whereas Othello had once believed that he had no cause for jealousy because Desdemona 'had eyes and chose me', he now echoes Iago:

Haply for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have; or for I am declined  
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—  
She's gone. I am abused, and my relief  
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,  
That we can call these delicate creatures ours  
And not their appetites!

(3.3.267-74)

There run two common threads in Brabantio's, Iago's, and Othello's lines—first, that this match is unusual, 'unnatural', and therefore especially fragile, and second, that women are inconstant and deceitful. Whether Othello imbibes these beliefs from Iago, or Iago only plays upon what Othello already believes, the point is that for all of them male jealousy hinges upon racial difference as well as upon female infidelity.

Italian, and especially Venetian, women were reputed to be particularly licentious. Iago tells Othello:

In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience  
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.

(3.3.206-8)

Contemporary writings suggested that Italian women were 'very lewd and wicked, for even in the ancient city of Rome, there are many thousands of lewd living women that pay monthly unto the Pope for the sinful use of their wicked bodies'.<sup>8</sup> Venice was repeatedly pictured as a city full of whores, and it was often personified as one. Certainly the theatre made full use of this idea. Written some years after *Othello*, Webster's play *The White Devil* (1612) featured 'The Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona, the famous Venetian Courtezan'. In that play, Vittoria (who is adulterous but not a prostitute) spiritedly challenges the men who label her a 'whore'. But Desdemona is stunned when Othello asks her—'Are you not a strumpet? . . . not a whore? . . . I took you for that cunning whore of Venice | That married with Othello' (4.2.84-94). She can barely bring herself to repeat the word 'whore': 'Am I that name, Iago?' (4.2.121). Iago himself has called Desdemona a 'super-subtle Venetian' (2.1.355). Of

course, the audience knows that she is honest but by evoking these beliefs the play also suggests that perhaps Othello can be forgiven for thinking that Desdemona might be straying. This ambiguity is at the heart of the play—any sympathy for Othello reinforces the misogynist sentiments mouthed by some characters, and any sympathy for Desdemona endorses the view that Othello is a 'gull, a dolt, a devil'. Here, it is sexual politics that gives racial and cultural differences their cultural meanings and effect.

There are only three women in *Othello*—Bianca, who is treated as a whore, Desdemona, who is repeatedly accused of being one, and Emilia, who is dismissed as her 'bawd'. The charge of sexual impropriety haunts each one of them, and Desdemona and Emilia are murdered by their husbands. I have suggested that English stories of patriarchal violence in Muslim cultures served both to define the incivility of these cultures and to offer models for domestic control of unruly women. Burton repeats a picture common in many travelogues:

The Turks have I know not how many black deformed eunuchs . . . to this purpose sent commonly from Egypt, deprived in their childhood of all their privities, and brought up in the Seraglio at Constantinople, to keep their wives; which are so penned up they may not confer with any living man, or converse with younger women, have a cucumber or carrot sent in to them for their diet, but sliced, for fear. . . . I have not said all, they not only lock them up, but lock up their private parts . . . certain tribes . . . sew up the parts of female infants at birth, leaving a way for the urine, and when they grow up, give them in marriage thus sewn up, so that it is the husband's first business to cut apart the fettered nether lips of the maiden. (843-4)

Burton claims that Muscovites are as jealous as ancient Gauls, and concludes that "'Twas well performed and ordered by the Greeks, that a matron should not be seen in public without her husband to speak for her . . . For a woman abroad and alone is like a deer broke out of a park, whom every hunter follows' (863). Thus control of women is the defining feature of cultural otherness, but the divide between 'us' and 'them' mutates into a gender divide, so that horrific foreign practices become the basis for prescribing gender roles at home.

Burton writes that Jews and Africans 'will not credit virginity without seeing the bloody napkin'; like other writers of the period,

Burton gets this and many other stories from the enormously successful *History and Description of Africa* which was written in 1526 by a real-life Moorish convert, Al-Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al-Wezaa, Al-Fazi, known to his readers as Leo Africanus, or Leo Afer. This book was often reprinted during the sixteenth century. Four years before *Othello* was written, it was translated into English by John Pory, and long excerpts were reproduced in Samuel Purchas's travel collection *Hakluytus Posthumus*. Many English writers used Africanus to bolster their own opinions of Africans, Muslims, and women, and his descriptions of African women who 'pleasure' one another as well as of clitoral excision became central to Western medical discourse and its constructions of deviant female sexuality. In *Othello*, the same handkerchief shows up, this time not bloody with virginal blood but a napkin whose loss stands in for the 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's lack of chastity. Othello is both the jealous African and the Venetian husband watching out for the 'pranks' that Venetian wives 'dare not show their husbands'.<sup>9</sup> Africanus's book was widely seen as an 'insider's' scoop on Africa, and it reinforced several stereotypes about the Moors, including that of jealousy: 'No nation in the world is so subject unto jealousy; for they will rather lose their lives, than put up any disgrace in behalf of their women.'<sup>10</sup> Africanus suggests that such jealousy is an index of political and cultural sophistication, remarking that the more highly developed societies of that continent displayed male jealousy, whereas the more brutish kinds of people in Africa let their women roam like uncontrolled animals. The words 'liberal' and 'jealous' are constantly juxtaposed in his book, infusing an element of admiration for the jealous Moor.

Such narratives help us to gauge the various ways in which *Othello* might have played upon the beliefs, anxieties, or desires of its audiences. Desdemona not only disobeys her father and chooses her own husband, she defends her choice in front of the Senate, openly affirming her sexual passion for Othello. As I have suggested elsewhere, Desdemona's passion needs to be articulated explicitly because its object is black, but such articulation makes it especially transgressive and disturbing.<sup>11</sup> If she was 'half the wooer' then Othello cannot be a magician who has illegitimately charmed her, as Brabantio suggests. The white daughter has not been raped but actively desires the black man. But Desdemona rewrites her transgression in terms of

ordinary familial patterns, pointing out that breaking away from a father is necessary in order to cleave to a husband:

I do perceive here divided duty.  
To you I am bound for life and education.

You are the lord of duty,  
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord.

(1.3.180-8)

Desdemona's affirmation of desire is cleverly articulated in the language of wifely obedience, ignoring the fact that Othello's colour alters the usual scenario of female transitions from one man to another.

On the Renaissance stage, lovers who challenge familial authority are usually romanticized, even if they ultimately meet a tragic fate. But married (even widowed) women who disobey their husbands (or other male figures of authority) are usually punished, even if these men are tyrannical. Critics have argued that the plays thus help propagate a new ideal of 'companionate marriage' in which romance is not antithetical to matrimony, but women's chastity and obedience are still crucial. Assertions such as this—'England is a paradise for women, and hell for horses: Italy a paradise for horses, a hell for women'—were double-edged, at once confirming English superiority over more rigid cultures, and barely masking an anxiety about female unruliness. Thus Desdemona's free banter with Iago and her spirited defence of Cassio, although innocent, stages a model of behaviour that was controversial in the culture at large. So does Emilia's outspokenness, even though it is her submission to her husband, and not her defiance, which allows the handkerchief to be used as evidence against Desdemona. It is hard to conclude whether violence against outspoken or transgressive women on the stages of the time had the effect of reinforcing patriarchal attitudes to women, or of unsettling them. The effects of stage narratives are likely to have been diverse, tapping as they did into a wide spectrum of changing beliefs about gender roles. It is even harder

to assume that all audiences, who included both men and women of different classes, would have responded uniformly to stage characters such as Desdemona and Emilia. However, the point is that such figures speak to widespread contemporary anxieties and debates about appropriate female behaviour, and in Desdemona's case the question of wifely submission is especially complex because the husband is a Moor. For all their heterogeneity in terms of class and gender, *Othello's* original audiences and actors would have been mostly English and entirely white.

### Venice, Spain, and Turkey

The English saw Venice not simply as a place for female deviance, but also as an ideal republic and hub of international trade. Whereas female 'openness' was dangerous and immoral, political and mercantile openness was much admired by an England in search of overseas markets and colonies. Despite its Catholicism, Venice became an ideal that was invoked by English writers subtly to critique domestic affairs. In 1599, Lewis Lewknor translated into English Contarini's *Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, a work with which Shakespeare was familiar.<sup>12</sup> This book helped propagate a 'myth of Venice' in England which exalted the city-state as an open but ordered society, a model of civility which informs Brabantio's angry assertion: 'This is Venice. | My house is not a grange' (1.1.107-8). Brabantio's choice of words is ironic, for Iago tells him that in fact his house *has* become a grange in which a 'black ram', a 'Barbary horse' is 'tupping' his daughter (1.1.88, 89, 113). Venetian civility has been built by letting in the very foreigners who now threaten to undermine it at a different level. Because Othello is needed in order to combat the Turks, the Senate is willing to regard him as 'more fair than black' but for Desdemona's father such colour-blindness is not possible. Here we see a tension between the state and the family, although the two were so often equated in contemporary political rhetoric.

How might an English audience have reacted to the Senate's pronouncements? As discussed earlier, England was increasingly hostile to foreigners, both officially and at a popular level, and London had witnessed several major riots against foreign residents and artisans. Would this play have unsettled or reinforced such hostility?



Did the play make the case for a tolerant society, or did it issue a warning not only to disobedient daughters but also to 'open societies' who let in outsiders, especially black ones? It might be useful to recall that if some English writers extolled the virtues of Venice, others found Italy a dangerous model for the English: 'the religion, the learning, the policy, the experience, the manner of Italy' were the 'enchantments of Circe, brought out of Italy, to mar men's manners in England'.<sup>13</sup> Thus Venice's openness could also be viewed as dangerous by a society itself fairly suspicious of outsiders.

Some critics have suggested that Shakespeare's audience was in fact quite tolerant of Moors, and that *Othello* capitalizes on this tolerance to criticize Spain, where Christians had warred with Moors for centuries.<sup>14</sup> Spanish conflicts are crucial for understanding the racial consciousness of early modern Europe, and Iago's hatred of Othello definitely invokes the hostility of the Old Christians in Spain towards the newly converted Moors there. Iago's name recalls the patron saint of Spain, Sant Iago, or Saint James, who was known as Santiago Matamoros, St James the Moor-killer.<sup>15</sup> Hatred of Catholic Spain was a defining feature of Protestant England, who sought to define its own empire in opposition to that of Spain. Eric Griffin points to the fact that England was looking to establish mercantile and diplomatic relations with Muslim countries and that many English commentators suggested that Protestants and Muslims were alike in their hatred of both idol-worship and Catholics: 'Spain's national obsession with purity of blood', he concludes 'had met its ideological reverse in an English Protestant obsession with purity of faith' (82). This is in many ways a persuasive argument, and it is particularly valuable in insisting that we think about England not as an isolated unit but in relation to other European nations and colonial models. But can we then conclude, as Griffin does, that by demonizing Iago, *Othello* is indicting *only* Spanish racism and suggesting English tolerance?

The diplomatic flirting and mercantile exchanges between the English and the Turks and Moroccans cannot be isolated from a long and complicated history of ambivalence regarding Islam—attitudes to Muslims, especially Turks, were contradictory and complicated rather than simply admiring or simply negative. In fact I want to suggest that political and commercial desires to establish traffic

with Muslim powers exacerbated prevalent tensions and anxieties about religious and cultural difference. If on the one hand references were made to the shared Protestant and Muslim hatred of Spain and 'idolatry', then, on the other, English anti-Catholicism was often articulated by suggesting a continuum rather than a difference between Muslim infidels and Catholics. John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* argues that Turks are rampant all over Asia because of the 'dissension and discord, falsehood and idleness' that have spread among Christians. Thus, false Christianity such as Catholicism opens the door to Turks; the enemy is enabled by that which we 'nourish within our breasts' at home (964-5). Of course, Catholics in Spain and elsewhere argued exactly the opposite—that Protestants were the 'sect of Mahumette'; thus both sides regarded Muslims as 'only the whip with the which the holy and righteous Lord doth beat and scourge us for our own vicious living'.<sup>16</sup> Rather than representing clear English admiration of a group that was hated in Spain, *Othello* plays upon these ambiguities and contradictions about the Moors that intersected with schisms within Christianity.

Moreover, the history of Spanish blood laws tells us that the idea of purity of blood was not counterposed to, but measured by purity of faith. As we have seen, these two concepts were linked by the Inquisition, and by authorities in Spain and elsewhere. Conversion was officially required of Jews and Moors, yet it was culturally frightening precisely because it called into question the boundary between insider and outsider. That is why this boundary was increasingly defined in quasi-biological terms. An 'Old Christian' was now regarded as different in 'blood' from a new convert. Religious conversions also signal the possibility of a reverse traffic whereby Christians convert to another faith, another identity, and this was a pervasive fear all over Europe. Thus by linking faith to blood, the Christian authorities were also suggesting that 'turning Turk' was only a superficial exercise. This is precisely the dynamic that Shakespeare plays upon in both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, where Moors and Jews are dangerous precisely because they are 'of Venice', and where that danger is mirrored by the possibility that Christian maidens will become part of alien households.

Such anxieties were not confined to Spain. After their official expulsion in 1290, Jews could only live as converts in England, and

yet, as James Shapiro shows, Elizabethan England was still beset by anxieties about Jews that were heightened by events in Spain. Moors did not have the same long history of presence within England and the English tended to associate them with locations such as Turkey, Spain, Morocco, Persia, India, and parts of Africa. But widespread stories of Christians turning Turk brought the Moors closer home. Christian conversions to Islam were part of Crusading lore, and were also narrated as an essential feature of the Turkish Empire. Most urgently, though, they were seen as an alarming feature of the growing English trade with Ottoman and North African territories.

In a recent essay, Julia Reinhard Lupton evokes Christian/Muslim tensions to offer an argument that is the exact opposite of Griffin's. For her, a Muslim Othello would have been far more dangerous in the eyes of English audiences than a black Othello. A black Othello, Lupton suggests, is analogous to the uncivilized American or Caliban, a barbaric figure outside all religion and therefore more easily convertible to Christianity. A Muslim or Turkish Othello on the other hand is less convertible because he already owes allegiance to a rival religion of the book.<sup>17</sup> Lupton argues that critics have imposed upon the play the horror of 'monstrous miscegenation' which was a feature of the nineteenth-century racial imagination. In the Renaissance, she concludes, a black Gentile could be legitimately placed within the narrative of an international romance, in a way that the Infidel Turk could not: 'whereas for the modern reader or viewer a black Othello is more subversive, "other", or dangerous, in the Renaissance scene a paler Othello more closely resembling the Turks whom he fights might actually challenge more deeply the integrity of the Christian paradigms set up in the play as a measure of humanity' (74).

Lupton is right in asking us to place *Othello* within Christian Islamophobia, but I suggest that the play responds to contemporary tensions about religious difference precisely by complicating them with the question of skin colour. If on the one hand the lack of colour difference provoked acute anxieties about conversions in Europe, on the other, as discussed in Chapter 2, blackness posed different, but no less acute, misgivings about this process. It is Othello's colour that provokes anxieties about Othello's integration into Venice—Iago, Brabantio, and Roderigo do not worry that Othello will assimilate

unnoticed, but that he will produce, with a white woman, spectacular evidence of miscegenation. In fact, the power of this play is that it brings blackness and religious difference into simultaneous play while also making visible the tensions between them.

### Othello, Africanus, and Moorish Difference

Such mingling is also evident in Africanus's *History of Africa* which Shakespeare drew upon for his ideas of Moorish jealousy but also Moorish capacity for learning and military skill. The French writer Jean Bodin described Africanus himself as 'by descent a More, born in Spain, in religion a Mahumetan, and afterward a Christian, having by continual journeys travelled almost over all Africa; as also over all Asia minor, and a good part of Europe, was taken by certain pirates, and presented to Pope Leo the tenth'.<sup>18</sup> Othello narrates a similar tale of travel and captivity, and both Othello and Africanus establish themselves among Christians by narrating these stories. John Pory, Africanus's translator, marvelled 'much how he should have escaped so many thousands of imminent dangers', just as Othello tells the Senate that Desdemona loved him for his stories of 'dangers I had passed' (1.3.166). Africanus affirms his adaptability, claiming that he is like a 'most wily bird' called Amphibia, who would continually 'change her element' from air to water in order to avoid paying taxes to the king of birds as well as to the king of fishes. 'For mine own part', Africanus writes, when I hear the Africans evil spoken of, I will affirm myself to be one of Granada: and when I perceive the nation of Granada to be discommended, then I will profess myself to be an African' (190). Othello also mimics Venetian and Christian discourse to his own advantage, and strategically invokes his non-Venetian lineage and history when it suits him. Finally, Othello and Africanus also share another rhetorical strategy—Shakespeare's hero consolidates his own position in Venice by establishing his distance from cannibals and monsters whom he has overcome, and Turks whom he has fought and will continue to combat; similarly, Africanus establishes himself as a reliable historiographer by reproducing dominant notions about dark-skinned 'negroes' as well as African women.

Most critics regard Africanus's narrative as consolidating ideas of difference between Africans and Europeans by establishing his

authority as an eyewitness who was once one of 'them' but now has crossed over to 'us'. But Jonathan Burton rightly points out that Africanus also destabilizes some of these binary oppositions by asserting Moorish learning and achievement, by citing Muslim scholars, and by presenting Africans as a heterogeneous group of peoples with different lifestyles, achievements, and attributes.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes Africanus explicitly challenges European understanding of Africa, pointing out that they mispronounce the Arabic El Chahira as 'Cairo' (870) and harp upon Carthage's classical links with the story of Dido and Aeneas rather than seeing it as a modern complex city (715-16). However, Africanus manages to complicate received opinions about North African civilizations as well as lighter-skinned Muslim men only by reinforcing their distance from 'Negroes' and women. Burton also asks us not to collapse the historical figure Africanus into the literary hero, Othello. Both establish their own status by distancing themselves from people with whom Europeans could confuse them but whereas Othello cannot sustain his strategy and falls prey to the dominant discourse about Muslims and blacks, Africanus's text succeeds in establishing its claim to impartiality. For over 200 years, it was widely considered to be an objective and accurate account of 'Africa'.

This crucial difference between Othello and Africanus takes us back to the question of skin colour. Pory, Bodin, and other early modern commentators on Africanus draw attention to his being both a 'More and a Mahumetane in religion' (Africanus, *History*, 6). This seems to imply that Africanus, like Othello, was black as well as a Muslim. Given his Spanish origins, it is likely that his skin colour was dark in relation to Northern Europeans, but lighter than that of sub-Saharan Africans. Whatever his own colour, Africanus's *History* suggests that fairer Moors are more civilized than darker ones, and are therefore more translatable both into European codes of civility and the Christian faith. In his entire history of Africa, references to the civility of black people are rare; for the most part Africanus either ignores the non-Islamic sections of Africa or presents them as brutish. If, while discussing Barbary, he reminds readers that 'one of the African Christians' was 'that most godly and learned father Saint Augustine' (164), he also tells them that 'neither is there any region in all the Negroes land, which hath in it at this day any Christians at all'

(163). Whereas 'those which we before named white, or tawny Moors, are steadfast in friendship' (184), by contrast 'the Negroes lead a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of the dexterity of wit, and of all the arts. Yea they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forest among wild beasts. They have great swarms of harlots among them . . .'. Thus Africanus's text helps create a hierarchy within Africa that is colour-coded: if some Africans are as civil as Europeans, others are brutish and show no signs of being civilized.

*Othello* condenses this range of differences into a single individual, translating the tension between them into the social and psychic complexities of his being. The contradiction between dark skin and civility implied by Africanus's text resonates with Shakespeare's play, which also picks up on the religious tensions between Islam and Christianity as well as the European admiration for Moorish learning and valour. Thus *Othello* fuses various contemporary discourses of Moorish 'difference' which circulated in Shakespeare's times, reminding us that 'race' is not a homogeneous or clearly articulated category, but one that develops by drawing, often arbitrarily and contradictorily, upon various popular beliefs as well as more elite ideas, upon traditional notions as well as newer knowledges.

Shakespeare's play, I have suggested here, forges these beliefs about ethnic and religious difference, Africans, Moors, and Turks upon the anvil of gender difference. Yet here, as elsewhere, 'race' is also articulated with notions of 'class'. Iago's racial jealousy of the Moor is also a class envy of the servant who does not believe that his master has a right to be his master. Like Mosca in Jonson's play *Volpone*, Iago follows his master only waiting 'to serve my turn upon him' (*Othello*, 1.1.42). His master, moreover, was not born to his station; indeed being a Moor, he should not even have been able to acquire it. In Iago's eyes, Othello's colour should properly code him as Iago's inferior, it should undercut Othello's 'service' to the state as well as his 'royal' lineage. Iago operates by rhetorically asserting his bond with Othello as his servant even as he seeks to reverse their relationship by assuming control of Othello's actions. The 'temptation scene' (Act 3, scene 3) inverts the master-servant relationship as Iago assumes control of his master even as he states his own loyalty and subservience: 'I am your own for ever.'<sup>20</sup> Iago's vow echoes the

marriage ceremony, and affirms a homosocial alliance which will wreak vengeance on the erring woman.<sup>21</sup>

### *Othello* Today

At the beginning of this book I quoted Bloke Modisane, the South African writer who invokes *Othello* to question the racism of his own society. Whereas Paul Robeson and many others used their performances of *Othello* to focus on contemporary racism, the black British actor Hugh Quarshie questions the efficacy of such attempts:

if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or 'Moors', are over-emotional, excitable and unstable, thereby vindicating Iago's statement, 'These Moors are changeable in their wills'? Of all the parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should not be played by a black actor.

... Is there a problem with *Othello*? If there is, does the problem lie with me or with Shakespeare?

Interpretation inevitably brings revelation: when we interpret Shakespeare's plays, we reveal something about ourselves. But we may also legitimately consider what Shakespeare revealed about himself when he adapted and interpreted the original story from Cinthio... We credit him with sufficient imaginative power to believe that he could have fashioned a tale about a man coming to terms with the supposed betrayal and adultery of those closest to him without suggesting that a character's race determined his behaviour. Did he not do precisely this in *The Winter's Tale*?... The point is that Shakespeare, had he wanted could have done something similar: he could have told a tale of jealousy, betrayal and revenge without racial references. I suggest he chose the Cinthio story because he wanted to capitalize on the figure of the Moor. And I fear that figure still occupies the same space in the imagination of the modern theatre-goers as it does among Shakespeare's contemporaries.<sup>22</sup>

I have quoted Quarshie's remarks at some length because they remind us that our attempts to rescue Shakespeare's plays from the taint of racism may have something to do with the central place the Bard occupies in our own cultures and imaginations. It is not always possible to find in his plays the seeds of all that we regard as progres-

sive and humane. Like Quarshie, Ben Okri also does not find it easy to read Othello as noble, heroic, glamorous or radical: 'When a Black man in the West is portrayed as noble it usually means that he is neutralised. When white people speak so highly of a Black man's nobility they are usually referring to his impotence. It is Othello's neutrality and social impotence that really frightens me.'<sup>23</sup> So while for some of us Shakespeare's hero may represent the playwright's effort to complicate the pictures of Moors that circulated in his culture, for others Othello remains trapped within a white view of Moors. *The Winter's Tale*, Quarshie reminds us, does not suggest that Leontes' jealousy has anything to do with his whiteness, but each of Othello's characteristics as a husband, as a man, as a soldier, is always traced to his racial identity. This itself may be the problem—whether we regard him as noble or debased, challenging or confirming stereotypes, Othello can only be read against a collective category called 'Moors'.

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12. Joan Kelly, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', in *Women, History, Theory* (Chicago, 1980), 19-50. See also Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. Mcmanus (eds.), *Half Humankind* (Urbana, Ill., 1985); Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (eds.), *A History Of Women: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993).
13. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, Calif., 1965), 675.
14. Daniel J. Vitkus, 'Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48: 2 (Summer 1997), 145-76.
15. Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), quoted by Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1965), 153.
16. *Ibid.* 153.

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5. Richard Knolles, *General History of the Turks* (London, 1603), 350.
6. John Foxe, *Second Volume of the Ecclesiasticall History Containing the Acts and Monuments of Martyrs* (1563) (London, 1641), 992.
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8. *A True Relation of the Travels and Most Miserable Captivity of William Davies, Barber-Surgeon of London* (1614) in Osborne, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 476.
9. Patricia Parker, 'Fantasies of "Race" and Gender, Africa, *Othello* and Bringing to Light', in Patricia Parker and Margo Hendricks (eds.), *Women, 'Race' and Writing* (London, 1994), 84-100, 95.
10. Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa*, ed. Robert Brown (New York, 1906), 183.

11. Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, 1989), ch. 2.
12. See David C. McPherson, *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Myth of Venice* (Newark, Del., 1990).
13. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (London, 1579), 26.
14. Eric Griffin, 'Un-sainting James: Or, *Othello* and the "Spanish Spirits" of Shakespeare's Globe', *Representations* 62 (Spring 1998), 52-99.
15. Barbara Everett, 'Spanish *Othello*: The Making of Shakespeare's Moor', in Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (eds.), *Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge, 2000), 64-81.
16. *A godly consultation unto the brethren and companions of the Christian religion* (Antwerp, 1542), fo. 6<sup>r</sup>.
17. Julia Reinhard Lupton, '*Othello* Circumcised: Shakespeare and the Pauline Discourse of Nations', *Representations* 57 (Winter 1997), 73-89.
18. Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa*, 105.
19. Jonathan Burton, '"A Most Wily Bird": Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference', in Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (eds.), *Postcolonial Shakespeares* (London, 1998), 43-63.
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21. See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (Oxford, 1991), 157-62.
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## CHAPTER 5. THE IMPERIAL ROMANCE OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

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2. Peter Heylyn, *Microcosmus or A little description of the whole world* (Oxford, 1621), 387.
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5. Karl H. Dannenfeldt, 'Egypt and Egyptians in the Renaissance', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 6 (1959), 7-27, 2-21.